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Do Early Field Experiences Make a Difference In Perceived Professional Development And Commitment To Teaching Of University Students Preparing To Become Elementary School Teachers?

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DO EARLY FIELD EXPERIENCES MAKE A DIFFERENCE IN PERCEIVED PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND COMMITMENT TO TEACHING OF UNIVERSITY STUDENTS PREPARING TO BECOME ELEMENTARY SCHOOL TEACHERS?

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Although the concept of early field experiences in teacher preparation programs is not unique, the attempts to measure the effectiveness of directed experiences in elementary schools for freshmen and sophomores is limited. These experiences have been included in preparation programs as a response to students and faculty feeling a need for direct concrete experiences during the early phases of the preparation program. This need is based on the theory that students should have concrete professional field experiences prior to enrolment in professional courses which should allow for greater understanding of the abstract theories and concepts of teaching and learning presented by the education faculty. Also, a second theory often expressed, is that it is too late for the student to enter student teaching at the junior or senior year and find that after working in a school environment, their individual career choice of wanting to become a teacher was unwise. (Adelman, 1978).

Many programs of early field experiences have been implemented by teacher preparation institutions based on the premise that needs associated with the two aforementioned theories are being satisfied. A few researchers have collected data that display school field experiences are meeting the intended needs. (Lacefield & Mahan, 1980; Paschal & Trabar, 1979). However, in most cases these programs continue to operate with their value being based on assumption.

This report provides a description of the early school field experience program of the Center for Curriculum and Instruction, The University of Nebraska-Lincoln. The article also presents data and findings utilized to determine if the program is meeting its intended purposes as well as to provide clues for program modification.

Professional Laboratory Experience

Students majoring in Elementary Education at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln are required to complete two-one semester credit hour

courses entitled Professional Laboratory Experience. The courses are taken during the freshman or sophomore year and are a prerequisite for entrance to professional courses in the various subject areas and student teaching. The Director of the Professional Laboratory Experience program assigns 100 to 200 students per semester to elementary schools in Nebraska (in a few cases to schools in other states) for two days per week, two hours per day.

The Professional Laboratory Experience program was developed in response to the expressed needs and interests of college students, elementary school teachers, administrators and college professors to provide more practical experiences in the preparation program of teachers. The Professional Laboratory Experience program was designed to provide each student:

* experiences to confirm interests and abilities to pursue teaching as a career,
* experiences to develop understanding of teaching-learning processes,
* experiences in a variety of teaching-learning situations,
* experiences that provide an overview of the total elementary school instructional program and operation,
* experiences to develop an awareness of contemporary issues and trends in education,
* experiences that provide an understanding of the elementary school teacher's role with respect to professional rights and responsibilities,
* experiences that provide for interaction with elementary school students of various ages and with various needs,
* experiences that provide for interaction with elementary school teachers as well as other school personnel, and
* experiences that provide for the development of professional skills, understandings and attitudes possessed by professional educators.

While working in their assigned elementary school, students enrolled in the Professional Laboratory Experience program are exposed to a variety of professional and para professional activities. These activities include teacher aide type tasks such as putting up bulletin boards, mimeographing materials, supervising playground and other tasks commonly associated with teacher aide duties. As they display professional abilities, the students are allowed to assume professional responsibilities under the direction of their cooperating teacher. These responsibilities may include one to one and small group instruction on a specific skill in the various subject areas.

If a student displays appropriate competence, they may be allowed to work with an entire classroom of children on a specific lesson designed by the cooperating teacher. Another important dimension is the student's initial development of awareness to the problems of mainstreaming, sex equality, racial equality and bilingual education. Cooperating teachers evaluate the performance of the university students during the semester in the areas of attendance, ability, attitude-interest, effort, evidence of growth and responsibility. The students are required to submit a report about their experience to the Program Director. Included in the report is a description of the school's physical characteristics, the school staff, the nature of the student population, the instructional programs and materials in use and their contact or observation of parent involvement. The Director evaluates the reports based on spelling, usage, punctuation, sentence structure, critical thinking and evidence of professional growth. Students that receive non acceptable ratings on the evaluative items utilized by the cooperating teacher or Program Director are required to meet with their faculty advisor and determine how the deficiencies displayed may be overcome.

Does the Program Make a Difference?

The general feeling among university faculty, university students, cooperating teachers and elementary school principals is that the Professional Laboratory Experience program has made a difference in the professional development of students preparing to become elementary school teachers. To some degree these feelings are based on the content of the students' written reports and the evaluation of student performance by cooperating teachers. As previously mentioned, the two major goals of the Professional Laboratory Experience program are to help students confirm their career choice to become a teacher and expand their professional development through concrete experiences in elementary schools. The written reports submitted at the conclusion of the experience contain a summary statement in which students are expected to address their attainment of the two major program goals. The following are taken from

reports submitted by two students:

> This experience confirmed my interest in the teaching profession. I liked going to the school and I enjoyed working with the students. In talking with Mrs. B., I learned about problems that can arise, such as a father coming to get the child although only the mother has custody. It made me understand that the school system is changing. Classes are more individualized, and classroom teachers have to also teach the handicapped. Before I did this experience, I was uncertain if teaching was for me, but now I'm going to continue my education in the direction of becoming a teacher.

> The experiences that I had while participating in El. Ed. 108 were rewarding and educational. I say with some regret that El. Ed. 108 made me realize that teaching is not the career that I wish to pursue in my life. As I become more and more aware of the duties and skills needed to be performed by a teacher I began to feel negative about keeping this profession as my major. I enjoyed working with the children but I continually found myself spending more time with minority children and I took an interest in their personal problems. I feel that I want to get more involved with children who have problems at home and in society to an extent which goes beyond the classroom. In the course of this semester, I have decided to change my major to social work, which will hopefully help me to fulfil my goals.
>
> I have very positive feelings towards El. Ed. 108 because it made me realize the type of career that I really want. At this point in my life any experience that I have in working with people will help me in my future as a Social Worker. El. Ed. 108 served as an excellent tool for getting involved in working with children of various cultures and with administrators.

The above statements seem to reflect that the major goals of the Professional Laboratory Experience program are being realized. At least for these two students. However, without quantitative data few genuine conclusions regarding the program quality or need for modification can be established. As a starting point in the collection of quantitative data the writers felt that the perceptions of university students participating in the program would be of value. Therefore, the following hypotheses were formulated to arrive at conclusions regarding the program effectiveness as well as need for modification:

* There is no significant difference in the perceptions of students regarding their professional competence prior to a field experience as compared to after the experience.
* There is no significant difference in the perceptions of students regarding their commitment to teaching as a career choice prior to a field experience as compared to after the experience.
* There is no significant difference in perceptions regarding professional competence between students with previous field experience and those without after the completion of a field experience.
* There is no significant difference in perceptions regarding commitment to teaching as a career choice between students with previous field experience and those without after the completion of a field experience.

To test the above hypotheses the writer developed a survey instrument designed to measure students' perceptions of their professional competence as well as their commitment to teaching as a career choice. The demographic section of the instrument included student class standing and amount of field experience in elementary schools provided by university classes and non university programs. Using a Likert type scale one statement related to commitment to teaching as a career choice was provided and ten statements related to professional competence in the following areas:

experience with children with special needs
experience with instructional programs
understanding of the teaching-learning processes
experience in a variety of teaching-learning situations
understanding of the total operation of an elementary school
understanding of issues and trends in education
understanding of the teacher's professional role
experience in interacting with children
experience in interacting with school staff
level of professional skill, attitude and understanding

The survey instrument was pilot tested with a group of university

students similar to those included in this study. Based on the results of the pilot test, minor modifications were made to provide greater clarity in directions and statements included in the instrument.

During the Fall semester of 1980 the instrument was administered to 117 students enrolled in the Professional Laboratory Experience program prior to the start of their experience. Among the students surveyed 69 did not have fifty or more clock hours of field experience in an elementary school and 48 of the students had completed fifty or more clock hours of field experience in elementary schools through university or non university programs.

Results of the Study

The survey instrument utilized to collect pre experience and post experience data was subjected to a pre and post reliability test. As displayed by the data presented in Table 1, use of a Cronbach Alpha displayed internal consistency of .876 on both the pre and post survey. Therefore, an acceptable degree of reliability for the instrument was established.

TABLE 1

Survey Reliability

	Pre	Post
Item N	11.0000	11.0000
Mean	33.2650	38.4444
Standard Deviation	7.3630	6.4613
Alpha	0.8759	0.8762

To determine if there was a significant difference in the perceptions of university students regarding their professional competence prior to a field experience as compared after the experience the data collected was subjected to a T–Test. As displayed in Table 2 there was a high significant difference in the perceptions of the students prior to a field experience in an elementary school as compared to their perceptions after the experience was completed. Therefore, it can be concluded that the university students perceived themselves to be more competent after the field experience (M = 36.4786) than prior to the experience (M = 28.5128).

TABLE 2

Perceptions of Students Toward Their Professional Competence Prior to and after Completion of a Field Experience (N=117)

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation	Standard Error	T-Value	Degrees of Freedom	2-Tail Probability
Pre-Competence	28.5128	7.071	0.654	−14.75	116	0.000***
Post-Competence	36.4786	6.634	0.613			

***$p < 0.000$

Through use of a T–Test it was found that at the .052 level of significance that the university students included in this study displayed a greater commitment to teaching as a career choice after they completed a field experience (M=4.6838) as compared to their commitment prior to the experience (M=4.5385). Since 5.0000 was the highest possible mean it should be noted that the group had a strong commitment to teaching as a career both prior to and after the field experience.

TABLE 3

Perceptions of Students Toward Their Commitment to Teaching As a Career Choice Prior to and after Completion of a Field Experience (N=117)

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation	Standard Error	T-Value	Degrees of Freedom	2-Tail Probability
Pre-Competence	4.5385	0.689	0.064	−1.96	116	0.052*
Post-Competence	4.6838	0.816	0.75			

*$p > 0.05$

To determine if there was a significant difference in perceptions regarding professional competence between students with previous field experience and those without after the completion of a field experience the data collected was subjected to analysis of variance. The data presented in Table 4 displays that at the .0058 level of significance students with previous field experience (N=48) perceived a higher level of competence (M=38.5745) at the completion of their Professional Laboratory Experience than students (N=69) with no or limited prior field experience (M=35.1449).

TABLE 4

A Comparison of Post Competence Perceptions Between Students with Prior Field Experience in Elementary Schools and Those Without (N=117)

Source of Variation	SS	df	MS	F
Between Groups	328.8324	1	328.8323	7.919
Within Groups	4734.0286	115	41.5266	
Total	5062.8594	116		

*p 0.05

The data presented in Table 5 displays that there was no significant difference at the .05 level between students with previous field experience and those with little or non in regard to the commitment to teaching after completing the Professional Laboratory Experience. Through analysis of variance a 0.06 level of sigificance was established. Although greater than a .05 level, for the purposes of this study the writer feels the finding is significant. The instrument utilized provided for a possible high mean of 5.0000. The post commitment to teaching mean for the total population was 4.6838, the mean for students with previous field experience was 4.8511 and the mean for those without previous experience 4.5652. As displayed by the means, the total group had a high degree of commitment to teaching as a career choice at the end of their Professional Laboratory Experience as well as displaying significant growth from pre to post assessment (see Table 3). Therefore, the writer feels it is reasonable to conclude that students with previous field experience in elementary schools displayed a greater commitment to teaching as a career choice than those without prior field experiences.

TABLE 5

A Comparison of Post Commitment to Teaching as a Career Choice Perceptions Between Students With Prior Field Experience In Elementary Schools and Those Without (N=117)

Source of Variation	SS	df	MS	F
Between Groups	2.2844	1	2.2844	3.476*
Within Groups	74.9135	115	0.6571	
Total	77.1979	116		

Summary

This study was concerned with the early field experience phase of teacher preparation. Students enrolled in preparation programs, practising teachers, administrators and professors of education feel that early field experiences in schools can and do make a difference in the quality of teacher preparation programs. If properly designed and implemented they can serve as a sound bridge from theory to practice and can help students confirm teaching as a career choice before making major investments of time and financial resources.

This study examined the perceptions of 117 Elementary Education Majors of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln regarding their commitment to teaching as a career choice and their competence prior to a field experience and after the experience. Also, among the 117 students involved in the study a comparison of perceptions was made between those with previous field experience in an elementary school and those with limited or no experience. The writer feels that the findings of this study suggest the following conclusions regarding early field experiences as a phase of teacher preparation.

> Through an early field experience in an elementary school students majoring in elementary education develop a greater commitment to teaching as a career choice.
>
> University students majoring in elementary education feel that they increase their professional competence as a result of an early experience in an elementary school.
>
> University students majoring in elementary education that have had previous field experiences in elementary schools display a greater commitment to teaching as a career choice and feel they have attained greater professional competence at the end of a field experience than students without previous field experiences in elementary schools.

The conclusions arrived at through this study suggest that early field experiences in elementary schools are a viable part of teacher preparation programs. Also, it appears that more than one field experience will increase a student's commitment to teaching as a career choice as well as their feelings about their professional competence.

Notes

A copy of the instrument utilized for this study can be requested from F. Wm. Sesow, 105C Henzlik Hall, The University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Nebraska 68588, U.S.A.

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USE OF STUDENT PERCEPTIONS IN FACILITATING IMPROVEMENT IN CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENT*

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Probably the best known and most widely used technique for studying teaching in order to improve it is classroom interaction analysis (Dunkin & Biddle, 1974; Peterson & Walberg, 1979). The coding of classroom communication (usually verbal) according to category schemes has been used extensively and successfully in preservice and inservice education as a way of making teachers aware of and subsequently improving their own teaching. Used for this purpose, interaction analysis has provided teachers with a method of obtaining specific feedback on their classroom practice and a firm basis for reflection, discussion, and improvement related to their teaching.

As an alternative to interaction analysis, student perceptions of their classroom environment can provide teachers with feedback on their teaching as a basis for guiding improvements in classrooms. Despite the potential usefulness of student perceptions for this purpose, surprisingly little attention has been given to exploring how educators might use feedback based on environment assessments to facilitate environmental change. The purpose of this paper is to describe a study in which information about students' classroom environment perceptions were used successfully as a basis for guiding improvements in the environment of a particular classroom. Prior to reporting the study itself, attention in the following sections is focussed briefly on (1) related literature, (2) classroom environment research, and (3) the instrument used in the present work to assess student perceptions of classroom environment (namely, the Individualized Classroom Environment Questionnaire).

Related Literature

The amount of literature dealing directly with the use of student environments is scarce. Although Fraser (1981a) discusses ways of using environmental assessments to guide systematic attempts to improve classroom environments, the present paper provides the first published report

*Based on a paper presented at Annual Meeting of American Educational Research Association, Los Angeles, April 1981.